

Civic Engagement and Global Citizenship in a University Context

Core business or desirable add-on?

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ABSTRACT

Can civic engagement become a 'core business' of the contemporary university, or is it an attractive 'add-on' that is not affordable in the current economic climate? Contemporary universities often play an important role in local community development and, as such, have the opportunity to develop civic engagement strategies to sit alongside teaching and research strategies. Yet the contemporary university is also internationally engaged, and the strategy of educating graduates to become global citizens could also become part of the key functions of 'socially embedded' universities. Ronaldo Munck explains how Dublin City University is attempting to negotiate the requirements of the economy with the demands of citizenship.

KEYWORDS *civic engagement, global citizenship, globalization, strategy, university*

INTRODUCTION

THE CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY AGENDA, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 'has moved on from a desire to simply increase the general education of the population and the output of scientific research, there is now a greater concern to harness University education and research to specific economic and social objectives' (OECD, 2005: 2). In particular, it is recognized that universities today can and must play a role in the development of civil society, and in building sustainable communities. The engaged university is doing far more than just preparing its students for employment: it is seeking to help create fully

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rounded citizens of their community, even perhaps 'global citizens' as befits the university of the global era. At Dublin City University we have initiated a civic engagement strategy as part of the 2006–2008 strategic plan, focused on enhancing citizenship, building community sustainability and fostering lifelong learning. The potential benefits for both the community and the university alike are, I would argue, considerable. But the question arises as to whether civic engagement is part of the 'core business' of the university alongside teaching and research, or whether it is simply an attractive add-on to be dispensed with when economic conditions turn from boom to recession as is currently the case.

It is now increasingly acknowledged that universities can play an important role in local community development in support of civil society, especially in a knowledge-based global economy and a world characterized by social exclusions and inequalities. The productive interaction between the university and the wider community can be beneficial in a number of ways. It can lead to enhanced human and social capital development, improved professional infrastructure and capacity building as well as, more broadly, to benefits for the socio-economic, environmental and cultural dimensions of the wider community. The contribution towards the development of active citizenship is an intangible but significant additionality to the core business of a university. To generate informed debate on issues of significance to communities is also an area where universities can contribute to the improvement of the quality of life. The university as a 'corporate citizen' can respond to real needs in the local community, with which it should work for mutually productive outcomes.

The contemporary university should not conceive of community engagement as something of a 'feel good' luxury or as a sideline. Rather, we need to understand citizenship as a vital third leg of what a university is about, alongside (and equal to) research and teaching. Certainly the Irish government now seems to be suggesting that 'innovation' should be the 'third pillar' alongside teaching and research but, arguably, the access agenda is even more important to drive forward in a recession. More broadly, student learning outcomes will be significantly enhanced through innovative curricula that are relevant to community issues and priorities. Increased opportunities for students in terms of experiential learning through community engagement will benefit them and the university. New research opportunities and funding sources can also be opened up for academics that engage creatively and openly with their wider community. There will also be an intangible but nonetheless real benefit for a university's reputation if it is seen to act as a good citizen in relation to its wider community. Community engagement should thus be seen as a core activity of the contemporary university.

The global history of university–community engagement in pursuit of citizenship highlights its importance in terms of defining university identity and in promoting sustainable cities and regions. For this citizenship strategy to be effective and durable, it requires deliberate and mutually determined collaboration between *all* sections of the university community (academic staff, administrative staff and students) and the wider community. Over and beyond this ‘buy in’ with all sections of the university and the community there is the need for this strategy to be embedded in practice, as well as principle. It is all very well for citizenship/community strategies to feature in strategic and mission statements, but these need to be embedded and mainstreamed in academic and student culture for them to deliver.

Universities could once assume a self-evident national remit and role in relation to the community they serve, but today higher education is now clearly part of a global system of knowledge generation and transmission and, increasingly, of a global labour market. Yet, in the discourse of most western universities, ‘internationalization’ denotes simply the attraction of more high-fee-paying overseas students. Little attention is paid – even theoretically – to students as global citizens, yet clearly today citizenship needs to be more than national if it is to be meaningful. The internationalization of the curriculum also lags far behind the internationalization of research. Globalization – or the new knowledge society, to put it in other terms – is having a massive, but as yet underspecified impact on all the academic disciplines. Another aspect of globalization – namely migration – is also changing the nature of the university, and this is at best recognized by token policies on diversity. Most universities have simply not been too successful at ‘educating global citizens in a diverse world’ (Banks, 2003). Citizenship education has traditionally had a national, not to say nationalist and assimilationist, character and as James Banks puts it: ‘Citizenship education must be transformed in the 21st century’ (Banks, 2003: 2). In Ireland there has been a campaign to develop ‘active citizenship’ (<http://www.activecitizenship.ie/>) but this has mainly focused around volunteering, and the theoretical underpinning has been a simplified version of the contested notions of Robert Putnam around ‘social capital’.

THE GROUNDED GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

Despite the recent financial meltdown and the virtual collapse of the self-regulating market model, we still live in global times. The university, like other institutions in society, is subject to a global knowledge system. The era of the national university serving a nation-state directly and unequivocally is well and truly superseded today (Delanty, 2001). As a recent OECD paper on globalization and higher education puts it, ‘the role of national purpose is

itself in doubt' (Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007: 70). The information revolution on the one hand and the new public management on the other have transformed utterly the traditional notion of the university. The international marketplace for ideas, commercialization, and increasingly researchers and students, transforms the university into a player in a global game. That game is, of course, competition in terms of global rankings. Even a small peripheral nation-state such as Ireland feels compelled to get at least one or two of its universities listed in the global rankings, whatever suspicions there are around their methodological rigour and relevance.

For the universities that cannot realistically compete in the global market, there is, of course, the option to serve local or regional needs. Many of the new universities in the UK, for example, explicitly orient themselves towards the local economy and seek to serve local social needs. There is also a long and honourable tradition of the civic university. These were founded in the nineteenth century by many major cities and were designed to provide 'practical' as well as academic knowledge. There are many universities today which serve a regional function oriented to the needs of the regional economy and society. However, the incentives provided by the global rankings are such that they have a powerful effect in 'normalizing' the university sector as a whole. These rankings have tended to make most universities focus almost exclusively on scientific research outputs to the detriment of their other roles. There may well be some form of backlash here, given the inherent limitations of these ranking methodologies (Van Dyke, 2005), and a revaluation of the local and regional university with an explicit social agenda.

If we were to think beyond the local-global binary opposition we could conceive of a 'grounded global' university. Critical studies of globalization have shown that it is not a 'nebula' out there somewhere 'doing things' to us. Rather globalization only operates successfully when it is grounded. In the business world the SONY Corporation realized this early on and developed the conception of 'glocalization' to articulate its commitment to local embeddedness of its global consumer goods. The term is derived from the Japanese word *dochakuka* which translates more or less as global localization. Glocalization, in terms of social theory, can be seen as a reflection of the general tension between the universal and the particular. I would argue that universities are glocal organizations on the whole, that is, they have both local roots and a global reach or context. To promote a grounded global university means to recognize that the world of knowledge is global but also that knowledge must be applied and grounded to be effective. The new grounded university would be well placed to articulate global citizenship as a key element of the student experience.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

The main component plan of university strategy that impacts on students as global citizens, apart from the internationalization strategy, is the civic engagement strategy – if indeed they have a separate civic engagement strategy, which is not always the case. This was a new departure for Dublin City University (DCU) for the 2006–2008 strategic period. DCU is a relatively young university with a strong science and technology orientation but sited on the north side of Dublin where there are the highest indices of social deprivation. The argument was that community or citizenship was, or should be, the ‘third leg’ of university core business alongside teaching and research. The main plank chosen to implement this new strategy was the opening of a teaching centre in neighbouring Ballymun in partnership with the local regeneration company Ballymun Regeneration Limited. North Dublin in general and Ballymun in particular had exceptionally low levels of access to higher education and the town/gown divide was at its widest. In June 2008 DCU in the Community was opened in an approximately 130-square-metre educational facility in the heart of Ballymun, with planning for this exciting venture going back to 2006. We were joined by the City of Dublin Vocational Educational Council (VEC) in an innovative partnership to produce joined-up thinking that could bridge the gap between the formal educational qualifications of local residents and university-entry requirements. The Shangan Road building has already begun to act as a real window between a severely disadvantaged neighbourhood and the world of higher education. Within DCU this social and educational experiment is causing waves across the system. How to ‘mainstream’ it? How to resource it? Should we try to open other such centres? These are, of course, the problems of success.

Another side of DCU’s engagement with the community is its ongoing effort to establish the DCU Science Shop, whose subtitle, Community Knowledge Exchange, captures well what it is designed to accomplish. Aided by a European Union grant, we have already completed a pilot project in partnership with CAIRDE, a local NGO (non-governmental organization) that works with migrants around health issues within a capacity-building framework. This NGO-led research partnership addressed the vital and neglected issue of migrants’ well-being from a mental-health perspective. Future projects with local partners are planned in the area of environmental issues. Within DCU, we are setting up structures and procedures so that community-based learning can prosper and be recognized as part of ‘normal’ teaching and learning. Our underlying objective is to move away from a ‘knowledge transfer’ model, where the university is seen as the font of all wisdom, to a more egalitarian ‘knowledge development partnership’, where

experiential wisdom and learning is recognized as valuable and essential to the engaged university.

While the 2006–2008 Civic Engagement Strategy was successful in terms of the main planks it was still largely seen as an ‘add-on’ to core business. Therefore for 2009–2011 we decided the main objective should be the ‘embedding’ of civic engagement across the university. The objective of building citizenship was fore-grounded much more clearly. Further than that, we realized that this ‘third leg’ of university work needed to be mainstreamed if it was to be successful. Thus DCU in the Community and the DCU Science Shop were taken respectively into the main teaching and research structures of the university. We did, however, launch one new initiative, namely Sustainable DCU, designed to make the university sustainable in economic, social, environmental and cultural terms. What is noticeable about the emergence of this theme through a process of consultation around the new civic engagement strategy, has been the enthusiastic support of the students’ union executive. It could well be that the broader objective of fomenting global citizenship amongst students could find an empowering platform in the Sustainable DCU project.

BEYOND THE TOWN/GOWN DIVIDE

For many local communities the university is perceived as an island or ‘enclave’ rather divorced from local needs. But as universities across Europe and the US have developed new ways of breaking down barriers between the academic ‘enclave’ and the local community, they have sought new ways to present themselves. In this way they seek to reinforce the role of the university as a key urban institution: not an enclave of learning that happens to find itself in a city but rather a key element of the city. This development is a crucial part of the process whereby universities help localities engage with the myriad of globalizing processes facing them. For example, DCU is represented on the board of a large number of local agencies and organizations, including the board of Ballymun Regeneration Limited, three area partnerships, a citizens’ information centre, a regional think-and-do tank (NorDubCo), and an environmental NGO in its immediate area.

We no longer hear so much about universities as ‘ivory towers’ divorced from the real world. Today, the complaint is more about the ‘corporate university’ dancing to the tune of the big pharmaceuticals and other corporate players. Many commentators now refer to the phenomenon of ‘academic capitalism’, as learning for learning’s sake gives way to the business agenda. While not wishing to deny that the contemporary university is affected by the market in many ways, we must note that it is also part of the community.

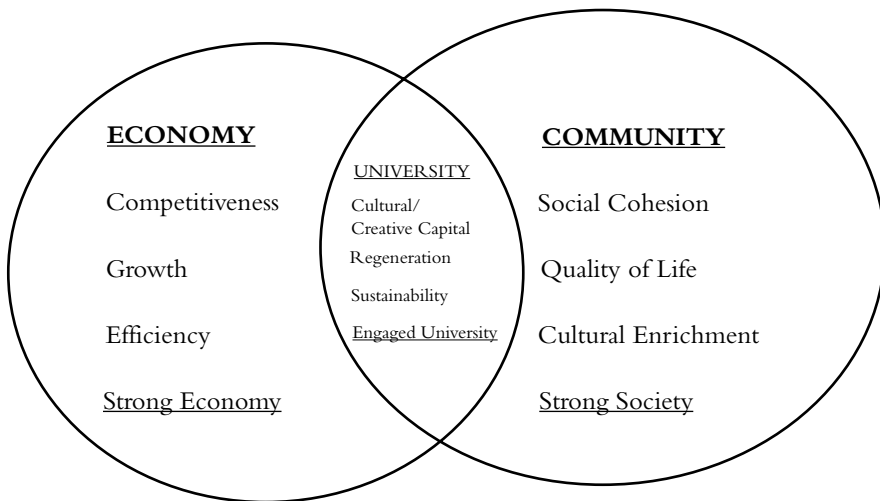


FIGURE 1 *The University, the Economy and the Community.*

Thus in Figure 1 we can see how the university sits at the intersection of the economy and the community.

We see in this diagram how the engaged university is both impacted by, and contributes to, a strong economy and a strong, vibrant society. Certainly, both domains pull the university in sometimes conflicting directions. But we can also envisage – and maybe should seek out – the ways in which economic and social factors may act in unison, and even create synergies and a win-win situation.

The engaged university recognizes that it is part of the community around it. The success of a university is very often completely intertwined with the prospects of the civic community of which it is a part. A thriving university boosts the town or city it is situated in. Likewise, a dynamic city is good news for any university trying to make its mark in a global knowledge system. The productive interaction and mutual engagement between the university and the wider community are beneficial to both in many ways. It is now increasingly acknowledged that universities can play an important role in community development, in support of civil society, in a knowledge-based global economy, and in a socially challenged world. This can lead to enhanced human and social capital development, improved professional infrastructure and capacity-building and, more broadly, to benefits for the socio-economic, environmental and cultural dimensions of the wider community. The contribution towards the development of active citizenship is an intangible but significant addition. To generate debates on issues of significance to

communities is also an area where universities can contribute directly to the quality of life.

THE EMBEDDED UNIVERSITY

If the university is not an ivory tower, nor an extension of the business world, then it needs to be socially embedded. There are dense social networks some may wish to call 'social capital' tying the university in with its local community. These can include social, economic, cultural, political and sporting links. Social embeddedness is a two-way street – a relationship that is sometimes fraught but always productive. Our close colleagues at Arizona State University (ASU) put it like this when describing their design aspiration to be socially embedded: 'a university can have an enormous impact on its surrounding community, and ASU wants to make sure it has the right kind of impact: sustainable, empowering and helping to effect positive change' (<http://ui.asu.edu/se>). The university is – or should be – firmly committed to social transformation and the pursuit of knowledge for the benefit of the community. A socially embedded university becomes anchored in a community, with its positive democratic and communal values. In its turn, the university can put its considerable intellectual resources to imaginative uses.

Some universities do not seem conscious of the place they inhabit, but smart universities make use of their surroundings and create mutually beneficial linkages with local communities and neighbourhoods. DCU is a Dublin city university in a very real sense. We do not exist only in an anonymous international academic market. Local issues impinge on us in a direct manner; for example, in relation to the Metro North project designed to create a rail link between Dublin city centre and Dublin airport passing through DCU, or the siting of Ikea (a major Swedish furniture outlet) in Ballymun. For its part, DCU – as a sizeable public institution – has the ability to bring community issues to light with a certain degree of independence and moral legitimacy. As a player with considerable weight in our local communities, the university needs to act in a socially responsible manner. If it loses its social relevance and denies a commitment to academic citizenship, it is in danger of making itself irrelevant.

DCU, like all the other Irish universities, is at a crossroads. We can no longer do business as in the past – therein lies the path to obsolescence – but the pathways to the future are not yet clear. As part of our path-finding mission, we are engaging in an ambitious Foresight exercise designed to map out the scenarios now opening up, and also navigating a way into the future that is both imaginative and productive (DCU, 2008). One of the emerging priorities is precisely that we need to focus on the social relevance of our

science and technology research. Universities are well placed – we would argue – to link the requirements of the economy with the demands of citizenship. The production of knowledge was once engaged in for its own sake; now we see the instrumentalization of knowledge by market requirements, which has undermined the traditional elitist role of the university. The contemporary university can regain a positive role by prioritizing social goals, by researching in socially relevant ways, and by placing social inclusion at the heart of its mission. DCU intends to play an increasing role with regard to the community around it. It is well placed to bridge the gap between science/technology and citizenship. Science needs to be relevant to people, and to engage with the day-to-day life of the citizen. Technology – not least, information and communication technology – permeates the world around us, but it needs to be humanized.

DCU is also well placed to bridge the gap between the global and the local. We are constantly reminded that we live in a global knowledge economy, but we also live in particular places. In DCU's case, it is firmly embedded in Dublin's Northside: a hinterland characterized by acute deprivation but also a great creative dynamism. For DCU, its civic engagement strategy is not an 'add-on' – something nice to do during the good times; rather, we are firmly committed to building our civic engagement role by promoting DCU in the community in all its aspects, and working alongside others to promote social, economic and cultural development in our part of the city.

CONCLUSION

The agenda of the grounded global university is very much a work in the making. It will not shift the student-as-consumer discourse to one based on global citizenship overnight. However, I do think my analysis provides some evidence that there are realistic options to the neoliberalization and marketization that critics (Lynch, 2006) tend to see as overdetermining or overwhelming. It sometimes seems as if the critics are imprisoned by the overwhelming logic of neoliberalism. Certainly I would not wish to minimize the very real pressures of marketization, but universities very clearly are not and will not become businesses. The battle for ideas is now on, and the future of the university cannot be assumed, as it will depend on circumstances and political will. The objective of orienting the grounded global university towards a new mission of encouraging the students towards global citizenship is a worthy and realizable objective (Brown, 2006). It will most certainly entail a change in the mindset of many systems and staff, not to mention students themselves, but it would provide a valuable addition to the traditional university objectives in an era of global complexity. In this way the university

could become part of an exciting international debate on the future of citizenship in the era of globalization (Kivisto and Faist, 2007; Mayo, 2005).

Since this article was first written, Ireland has slipped from Celtic Tiger status to the 'next Iceland'. The cold winds of austerity policies are blowing through academia and all attention is on the economy. There is, of course, a danger that civic engagement, citizenship and even the access agenda will be seen as luxuries we can ill afford. Should we not all be focused on jobs, investment and technical skills? Certainly we need innovation and we want to build a 'smart economy' (the latest logo of the Irish government). But we also need to invest in education and access for the period after the recession, which is, after all, part of the capitalist cycle and not a new condition of life in the twenty-first century. Some universities are going down the route of 'rationalization', not least the 'big two' in Dublin: University College Dublin and Trinity College Dublin. There is indeed a need to rationalize teaching and create research synergies in neighbouring universities. But none of this detracts from the increased need for genuine civic engagement by universities in a period when their surrounding communities will be placed under increasing economic pressure. For its part, DCU has just completed its strategy for the period 2009 to 2011, and this includes a renewed commitment to civic engagement, seeking its further embedding within all university structures and processes. If civic engagement is to be meaningful and sustainable it cannot simply, however, be seen as 'embedded', but must be an integral part of what university administrators call 'core business'. It is a challenge for all civic-minded academics to make that case.

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